

# Meeting the Educational Needs of Young Gifted Readers in the Regular Classroom

by Michele Moore



Four-year-old Susie was sitting on the couch with her dad when a commercial for Kenmore washers and dryers was broadcast. “Kenmore colorfuls” flashed on the screen, and Susie read it aloud to her dad. “Kenmore colorfuls . . . look Daddy, you can get washing machines in different colors.” Her father looked at her with amazement; he didn’t know his daughter could read.

It is likely that all kindergarten teachers will have a young gifted reader in their classroom at some point in their career, and they must be prepared to meet the needs of this very special population.

## Characteristics of Young Gifted Readers

Vosslander (2002) defines a young gifted reader as “one who displays the three aspects of giftedness that Renzulli proposes (above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity) in the area of reading” (p. 14). Renzulli (1998) argues that gifted students have three characteristics that interact to create giftedness:

1. *Above average ability* includes general abilities and specific abilities. *General abilities* include those skills that can be measured by standardized or IQ tests, such as word comprehension, word fluency, and verbal reasoning. *Specific abilities* are specialized skills best measured by performance-based assessments, such as making up stories, illustrating stories, and finding connections between stories with similar themes.
2. *Task commitment* includes self-confidence, hard work, and an ability to recognize one’s own special talents and skills and the practical use of those skills. Early

readers who demonstrate task commitment will realize that they are able to read texts that are more difficult than those being read by their classmates and will show an interest in further developing these skills by expressing their areas of reading interests and projects that they would like to develop.

3. *Creativity* is originality in thinking. Early readers will likely have very different and more advanced interpretations of readings than their classmates. They may see novel connections between similarly themed texts and/or may offer interesting explanations for an author’s choice of setting, character, plot, and so on.

According to Mills and Jackson (1990), young gifted readers require less drilling than their classmates, have longer attention spans, and are able to retain larger quantities of information. These children also have extraordinary discrimination and generalization abilities and are known to use more effective reading strategies than average readers (Bond & Bond, 1983). Schnur and Lowrey (1986) report that young gifted readers use phrases and entire sentences at an early age that accurately incorporate advanced vocabulary words. They are also able to use context and picture cues more successfully than their peers to aid word identification and comprehension.

Unfortunately, some negative characteristics can be associated with precocious reading ability. Kingore (2001) and Richert (1997) report that young gifted readers can display some or all of the following problem behaviors:

- self-criticism,
- inability to deal with failure,

- boredom with grade-level curriculum,
- inappropriate behavioral outbursts or reactions,
- sloppy work,
- demanding of their parents' and teacher's attention,
- demanding of other students,
- inconsiderate of others needs/wants, and
- difficulty transitioning from one subject to the next during the school day.

Halsted (1994) reported other negative outcomes of precocious reading. Young gifted readers may push themselves to read any text they can decode before they have the emotional maturity to comprehend the material; it can be difficult to find advanced level books for young readers that contain age-appropriate material. Finally, reading ability is affected by the young child's environment. Most of these children have parents who created a very rich literacy environment for their young children (Lefevre & Senechal, 1999). There are, however, would-be gifted readers who come from disadvantaged households where reading materials may not be as available. This experience can seriously diminish the display of reading skills in these young children.

## The Instructional Needs of Young Gifted Readers

"The instruction of children must respond to their abilities in order that they all reach mutual as well as individual goals in school" (Hansen & Robenhagan, 1993, p. 4). Previous research demonstrates that the learning needs of gifted and talented students go beyond what is traditionally provided in the regular

classroom (Starko & Schack, 1989). Current research has shown that gifted elementary school children who participate in special programs do better academically than their gifted peers receiving no special services (Collins & Aiex, 1995). Research has also shown that holding an advanced reader to a grade-level reading curriculum can negatively impact his or her continued above-average reading development (Gentry, 1999; Kulik & Kulik, 1996).

One factor that limits long-term accelerated development of reading skills is the lack of challenging reading materials in the classroom. Chall and Conard (1991) analyzed the match of text difficulty to reader readiness. They found that "... language arts texts for advanced readers provided little or no challenge, since they were matched to students' grade placements, not their reading levels" (p. 111). Another study found informational texts to be almost nonexistent in first grade classrooms, yet young gifted readers demonstrate a strong interest in this type of reading material (Duke, 2000).

Another factor that can negatively affect the reading development of these readers is their educators' definition of differentiated curriculum (Tolan, 1985). A teacher who gives a young gifted reader an advanced text to read quietly while he or she performs drills with the rest of the class is not providing sufficient programming for this child. Educators must provide challenging learning activities along with advanced texts to truly meet the needs of these young readers.

## Identification of Young Gifted Readers

Although a child may be reading upon entering kindergarten, there may be skills that the child needs to

strengthen or develop. Before any instructional adjustments are made, the students' reading level and skill needs should be determined. Preassessments can also be used to determine a students' ability to use available reading strategies when confronting new or difficult text (Tomlinson et al., 2002).

A variety of formal assessments can be used to determine whether or not a young student is reading above grade level. The *Iowa Test of Basic Skills* (Hoover, Dunbar, & Frisbie, 2001) is recommended to assess reading achievement. The *Test of Oral Reading Fluency* (Deno & Marston, 1987) or *DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency* (Good & Kaminski, 2001) can be used to measure students' ability to read connected text with ease. It is also recommended that teachers administer *DIBELS Retell Fluency* (Good, Kaminski, & Dill, 2002) to ensure that a student's text comprehension skills are also above grade level. A student may be a very fluent reader at a young age, but if he or she is unable to comprehend the text that was just read, the child will quickly fall behind in reading if provided with advanced texts.

There are also a variety of informal measurements that can be used to assess primary students' attitudes toward reading and their views of the reading process. In addition to a student's reading level, teachers should also take into account the student's maturity level when making the decision whether or not to offer advanced reading instruction. The *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey* (McKenna & Kear, 1990), *Early Reader's View of the Reading Process* (Cecil, 1999), and the *Primary Reading Interest-A-Lyzer* (Moore, 2005) are three assessments that can offer teachers more information about their early readers.

Self-regulation should also be assessed in these students. Self-regulation has been characterized as an “active, internal executive control process” (Iran-Nejad, 1990, p. 573). One recommended standardized assessment of self-regulation is the *Response to Challenge Scale (RCS)*. The *RCS* measures cognitive, affective, and physical self-regulation in response to a physical challenge course (Lakes & Hoyt, 2003).

Self-regulation plays a major role in the successful academic performance of gifted students. Teachers have described successful learners as being self-directed, motivated, and taking an active role in the learning process. These students are able to identify, formulate, and even restructure task goals to suit their abilities or needs (Wang & Palincsar, 1985).

Not all gifted students are able to self-regulate to the same degree (Rohrkemper & Como, 1988). Some students are able to adjust their strategy use to meet the cognitive demands of an advanced curriculum on their own. Other students will automatically seek the help of teachers or other students because they want to limit their engagement in or avoid excessive cognitive effort (Como & Mandinach, 1983).

## Curriculum Modification for Young Gifted Readers

Advanced readers who have mastered on-grade-level skills need to have access to skill instruction that is above grade level. The skills must be advanced and may require teachers to look at the type of skill development often provided in the instruction offered to advanced level students. Researchers have made many suggestions for adjusting the curriculum for young gifted readers. For example,

Abilock (2004) reports that programs for gifted readers should include the following components:

1. *Inquiry reading.* This is usually reserved for students in grade 3 and above (Cassidy, 1981). For example, on-grade-level readers are learning basic reading skills using the Houghton Mifflin basal reader in their respective reading groups for 75 minutes per day. During this 75 minutes an advanced reader, who is reading two years above-grade-level, can go to the school library and with the help of the librarian research whales, a topic she has expressed interest in. Over a period of 4 weeks, she will create a presentation on whales to present to the class.

2. *Authentic research.* In grades K–2, authentic research involves the teacher working with the entire class. Students are taught basic research skills and are given a single research question to work on as a group. For advanced readers, the primary teacher may ask an upper grade-level teacher (certified in a particular subject) to teach the advanced readers a specific thematic unit. These students will work with the teacher to learn advanced research skills and the advanced concepts of a particular theme. They may focus on multiple research questions in a single session and will be expected to provide more in-depth responses to the questions. In grades 3–5, students would apply the research skills to work independently on individual topics.

3. *Individual work with mentors.* Mentors can be effective resources for early readers. First, mentors can serve the role of a personal tutor, as classroom teachers must often devote a majority of their time to on-grade-level readers. In some cases, early readers also need to develop advanced

reading skills before they can understand advanced text. Mentors can work with these students to teach them skills that they may encounter with the advanced text.

Mentors can also spend time with early readers to share information about a particular career or specialized skill that may be of interest. These meetings could take place during a reading instruction period or after school.

4. *Resources beyond the school community.* Guest speakers who are experts can be invited to the school to give presentations. Students interested in the topic of the presentation should be given the opportunity to attend. Classroom teachers or TAG teachers can also take students on field trips to locations that will provide students with additional information for their research projects (e.g., National Weather Service Office for students interested in meteorology, the astronomy department of a local university for those students interested in space).

5. *Extended, independent projects of choice.* Early readers may express an intense interest in a particular topic that normally would not be covered during their grade level. The teacher should work with the school librarian to locate resources for the student, guide the student in selecting a research question, and allow the student to work on his or her project during compacted lessons (see curriculum compacting below).

6. *Ability grouping.* Students are grouped according to their current reading level with all above-grade-level readers, all on-grade-level readers, and below-grade-level readers in the same groups. The teacher creates three lesson plans to meet the needs of the students at each level. The teacher rotates between groups to



provide instruction. Ability grouping can also occur between classrooms. An advanced reader in second grade may participate with the third grade for reading instruction. It is important for teachers to continuously reassess students' skills to be sure that their instructional needs continue to be met.

6. *Critical reading guidance.* Teachers should work with advanced readers to teach them the skills needed for critical reading that leads to the comprehension of texts. These skills include:

- Skimming over the text before initiating actual reading of the book.
- Using features of the text (e.g., text size, bold text, images) to predict what the book will be about.
- Utilizing background knowledge—personal experience, information learned in a class, previous knowledge.
- Making connections between the current text and texts read in the past, a student's personal experiences, and/or other real-world experiences.
- Summarizing the main ideas every few pages.
- Thinking about what they have read and personally responding to the text.

7. *Guided discussion of genres.* Teachers should introduce students to the variety of genres as strategies, rather than mere facts, through shared experiences. Have students discuss differences they may have noticed in the ways that books (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, and poetry) are written. Teachers should give students the opportunity to read books from different genres on a single topic, for example, *Lessons From Mother Earth* by Elaine McLeod (fiction),

*Earthwatch* by David Burnie (nonfiction), and *Earthshake: Poems From the Ground Up* by Lisa Westberg Peters (poetry). Students can then be given the opportunity to create their own works in these genres.

8. *Asking and responding to higher level questioning.* Higher level questioning requires students to go beyond the information that they should have simply learned from reading a book, listening to a lecture, or any other instructional method their teacher may have used to introduce a text (Rhem, 1999). Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) is an excellent resource to guide teachers as they create higher level questions for students.

For example, if a teacher is reading *When Little Bear Bragged* by Margaret Fox, questions such as "Why did Little Bear lose the race?" or "What animals did Little Bear play with during the race?" would be considered lower level questioning because these questions can be answered by simply reading the text—no higher level thinking is required.

To challenge the students, the teacher can ask the students to: "Explain how the following two stories, *When Little Bear Bragged* and *The Tortoise and the Hare*, are both alike and different" or "Pretend you are Little Bear. Write a letter (a teacher can write down the response for students who are not proficient writers or have the students use a computer to type their response) to Father Bear that explains the lesson you learned by losing the race to Grandpa Tortoise."

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss all of these suggestions in detail, but a few of the available modification options will be

explained. According to Dooley (1993), "A stimulating reading program for young gifted readers has at least two major components: provisions for mastering the basic curriculum quickly through curriculum compacting, and a differentiated curriculum created through modification of the content and the processes used to explore that content" (p. 547).

Previous research has shown that 50% of the current grade-level curriculum could be eliminated for advanced and gifted students (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992). Curriculum compacting is a method of altering the regular curriculum by eliminating the content students have already mastered and providing them with content that is appropriate for their ability level (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli). A preassessment will determine the content the student has already mastered and what the student still needs to learn. In exchange for on-grade-level texts, teachers can provide early readers with advanced texts. For example, if a first-grade teacher is teaching a unit on rain forests, he or she may select a rain forest text for advanced readers that represents more advanced vocabulary or abstract ideas (e.g., *The Great Kapok Tree: A Tale of the Amazon Rain Forest* by Lynne Cherry for on-grade-level readers and *Scholastic Q & A: Rain Forests* by Melvin and Gilda Berger for advanced readers).

Flexible grouping is another modification that can be used with young gifted readers. Students are grouped and regrouped in response to instructional objectives and students' needs (Tomlinson, 1999). When a teacher uses flexible grouping, a single student may work independently, work with a group during a language arts activity, and work with another

group during a science activity. Students can be grouped by skill, readiness, ability, interest, learning style, or for socialization. Flexible grouping can occur within the classroom, between grade-level classrooms, or even across grade levels.

Cluster grouping is one form of flexible grouping in which several advanced or gifted students in a particular grade are placed in a single classroom with an otherwise heterogeneous student mix (Gentry, 1999). Gifted students benefit from learning together and need to work with intellectual peers who have similar areas of strength (Kulik, 1992; Rogers, 1998). The classroom teacher should have specialized training in gifted and talented education to ensure that the learning needs of these students are met within the heterogeneous class. Since several advanced students are clustered together full-time in one classroom, a teacher can place them in a homogeneous group part of the day for more effective compacting and differentiation. Cluster grouping allows advanced readers to learn together on a daily basis while students of all other ability levels are grouped heterogeneously (Winebrenner & Devlin, 2001).

Renzulli (1988) recommends that activities for gifted students emphasize higher level thinking skills and use less structured teaching strategies. The Enrichment Triad Model would be one option for these students (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992). This model provides gifted children with the opportunity for self-directed learning through the use of Type I, II, and III activities (Renzulli, 1977). Type I activities are exploratory activities in which students are exposed to different areas of interest and then decide on a single topic or problem to study in depth.

Type II activities provide students with the technical skills and thinking processes needed to investigate their chosen research topic or problem. During Type III activities, students explore their topic or solve their problem through individual or small group work. Students then submit a product that reflects their learning (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli). This product could take any number of forms, from creating an informational brochure to organizing a fundraising effort for a particular cause. See Figure 1 to view a sample student's progress through Type I and Type II activities that lead to the development of a Type III project.

### Selecting Reading Materials for Young Gifted Readers

When selecting appropriate texts for young gifted readers, Austin (2003) reported that books to challenge these students should have the following characteristics:

- *Advanced language, structure, and point of view.* Young gifted readers enjoy abstractions, finding patterns, and making connections between two different, but similar texts (Van Tassel-Baska & Brown, 2001).
- *Ambiguous endings/content.* These young readers like to read books without predictable plots. They want to view reading a text as if they were trying to solve a puzzle.
- *Vocabulary that is rich, precise, and varied.* The purpose of reading is to increase knowledge; young readers should be offered books that will challenge them.
- *Characters who are professional role models and/or gifted individuals.* Young readers need someone

to identify with. There may be only one or two children who are able to read in the kindergarten classroom; we want these children to realize that their talent is a positive thing.

- *Pictures.* The use of picture books can be an excellent outlet for creative writing. Students can write their own stories to go along with the illustrations in the text or discuss the author's purpose for including certain details within the text.
- *Interest.* It is essential that the classroom teacher provide different text genres related to the young readers' interests (McIntosh, 1982).

### How Can Educators Assess Young Gifted Readers?

Authentic assessment should be used to assess reading comprehension. Many of the methods used in today's classrooms will not allow teachers to realize the higher level thinking abilities of these students. Some examples of authentic assessment methods to use with younger students include comparing and contrasting fiction versus nonfiction books on a similar topic, writing a letter to the main character to explain how he or she would handle a situation differently, or creating a presentation using Kidspiration or similar programs. It is important to provide a variety of opportunities that will engage students with any learning style.

Rubrics are another source of authentic assessment. They should be provided to students as a means of self-assessment; rubrics would be even more effective if the students were involved in the design of the rubric once they become familiar with the

### First Grade

TYPE I ACTIVITIES	TYPE II ACTIVITIES	TYPE III PRODUCT
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Read <i>Owl Moon</i> by Jane Yolen.</li> <li>2. Visited the following Web site: <a href="http://www.enchantedlearning.com/subjects/birds/info/Owl.shtml">http://www.enchantedlearning.com/subjects/birds/info/Owl.shtml</a> and learned about the different species of owls.</li> <li>3. Attended presentation on owls given by wildlife expert from local university.</li> <li>4. Explored an owl pellet.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Read the following nonfiction books: <i>All About Owls</i> by Jim Arnosky, <i>Welcome to the World of Owls</i> by Diane Swanson, and <i>The Barn Owls</i> by Tony Johnston. Read the following fiction books: <i>The Duck and the Owl</i> by Hanna Johansen and <i>The Owl and the Woodpecker</i> by Brian Wildsmith.</li> <li>2. Wrote to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for information about the threats to the owls' habitat.</li> <li>3. Researched how to use computer to create informational brochures, with text and images.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Created a brochure using Microsoft Word to hand out to students and parents at the annual ziti dinner and distributed copies to the local library to inform the public of the dangers facing owls.</li> </ol>

**Figure 1. Sample development of a Type III project**

process (Katz, 1997). Rubrics make the grading criteria clear to students; essentially, it puts students in control of their own performance. Even younger students will be able to document their own performance; they know beforehand what will earn them a  $\sqrt{+}$  versus a  $\sqrt{}$  or  $\sqrt{-}$ .

Finally, a Total Talent Portfolio (TTP) is another useful authentic assessment option. The TTP is a "vehicle for gathering and recording information systematically about students' abilities, interests, and learning styles" (Renzulli, n.d.). Students maintain primary control over their portfolios by choosing the items they want to be placed in their portfolios and defining the goals for what types of items they would like to include in the future. These portfolios will follow them year to year enabling their future teachers to understand the abilities and interests of their students.

According to Reis and Renzulli (1985), use of the Total Talent Portfolio enables educators to:

1. Collect information that reveals a student's strength areas.
2. Classify this information according to a student's abilities, interests, and learning styles.
3. Review and analyze the information in order to make educated decisions about providing the best opportunities for enrichment experiences.
4. Encourage the participation of students in decisions about their participation in special programs.
5. Use the information for educational, personal, and career counseling and for keeping parents informed about the services being offered to their child.

The use of Total Talent Portfolios with early readers will guide teachers when choosing interest-based reading

selections. For these younger students, teachers will have information about the types of books the students enjoy reading (e.g., informational texts, mysteries) and their interest areas (e.g., animals, space). Teachers can use this information to select high interest books that will challenge and motivate early readers to maintain their love of reading and continue their accelerated acquisition of reading skills.

### A Final Note

As Nancy Ewald Jackson (1991) states, "the nature of giftedness changes as skills and children mature. We need to balance the need to celebrate and support each child's current accomplishments against recognition that new challenges are encountered as development progresses; the same children may not always meet those challenges most successfully" (p. 12). It is our responsibility as educators to nurture these students and provide them with appropriate instruction at each level of their academic development.

### Recommended Resources for Educators of the Young Gifted Readers

#### Print Resources

Codell, E. (2003). *How to get your child to love reading: For ravenous and reluctant readers alike*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books.

In this text, Codell presents her theory that there are three issues that must be considered when encouraging a child to read: a child's personal interests, the ability to make connections between the book and the

child's experiences, and the ability of books to help children brainstorm their own ideas. She includes lists of books from a variety of themes.

Fredericks, A. D. (1987). *The gifted reader handbook*. Tucson, AZ: Goodyear Books.

This book includes projects and activities to develop critical and creative thinking skills.

Halsted, J. (1994). *Some of my best friends are books: Guiding gifted readers from pre-school to high school*. (2nd ed.). Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

This book includes summaries of approximately 300 books appropriate for gifted readers, summaries of research on gifted readers, and discussion questions that can be used during reading sessions.

Kingore, B. (2002). Reading instruction for the primary gifted learner. *Understanding Our Gifted*, 15, 12–15.

Kingore offers suggestions for professional development for educators of gifted readers and cites some research that has been performed with this population of students.

Polette, N. J. (2000). *Gifted books, gifted readers: Literature activities to excite young minds*. Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited Press.

This book offers suggestions for advanced reading and thinking activities for more than 200 children's books to meet the needs of gifted readers.

#### Online Resources

GT World Reading Lists  
<http://gtworld.org/gtbook.htm>

Guiding the Gifted Reader  
[http://www.kidsource.com/kid-source/content/guiding\\_gifted\\_reader.html](http://www.kidsource.com/kid-source/content/guiding_gifted_reader.html)

Recommended Books for Gifted Young Readers  
[www.tasgifted.org.au/pre-school\\_books.htm](http://www.tasgifted.org.au/pre-school_books.htm)

Pauline's List of Chapter Books for Young Gifted Readers  
<http://www.geocities.com/hard-ingpj/giftedkidsbooks.html>

PlanetEsme.com  
<http://www.planetesme.com>

Books for Children Featuring Gifted Children  
[http://www.hoagieskids.org/reading\\_lists.htm](http://www.hoagieskids.org/reading_lists.htm)

Read-Write-Think  
[www.readwritethink.org](http://www.readwritethink.org)

Bloom's Taxonomy's Model Questions and Key Words  
<http://www.utexas.edu/student/utlc/lrnres/handouts/1414.html>

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